

SUPPORT STRUCTURES OF IDEAS

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FINDING MY WAY TO ART

Raised in North Carolina close to the coast and down the street from the river, I was outside a lot. The summers were long, which allowed my friends and me ample time to explore the woods in our neighborhood and surrounding areas. We fished often. We would dig up some worms and bicycle down to several different banks or docks and drop a line in. My father always had a motorboat, so on some weekend mornings, we'd wake up super-early, pack some sandwiches and head out for the day. I would spend half the time sorting through Dad's variety of fishing lures, hooks, swivels, bobbers and weights. His tackle box was packed with shapes and colors, tools and line, only half of which I could figure out a use for. The mystery and ambiguity of these objects kept me fascinated with the thought of their possible uses.

I remember the Christmas I got my first tackle box, rod and reel. It came with a classic red and white striped spoon and a yellow and black polka dotted spinner and a few red and white bobbers. Lures as objects, with their bright colors, painted on eyeballs, articulation and tongues, seemed very similar to toys. But unlike most toys, they have a barbed hook attached, sometimes hidden within frilly skirts. I eventually learned that each one is designed for a specific fish by its color, markings, size and how it travels through or on the water.

Fishing always seems to be a way to tap into a world foreign to that of our own terrestrial realm. Underwater is a huge and yet contained universe filled with unseen animals and other living things. After casting my line, I've always tried to imagine the terrain that fish and lures traverse underwater. Until you get a bite and your catch breaks the surface of the water, it's all a mystery. You may be hoping to pull in a bass when out of the dark

water comes an old boot or a tree limb. It is all very similar to making art. You cast an idea and you have a mental image as to what it will be and look like. You begin making it, reeling it in. It starts taking shape and not until it is finished, standing in front of you, or flopping around on the ground, do you really know if it is a bass or a boot.

The fish is shaped and “built” for its natural environment. When I catch a fish, I release it back into the water, but handling a fish isn’t exactly second nature. How do you handle something that has been removed from its supporting environment? I find inspiration in these awkward situations. I am drawn to shapes and forms that appear to be intended for a specific use or place, but we experience as out of context. This leaves those specificities not readily known or obvious. These forms, often in need of some kind of propping-up or crutch, have become source material for my exploration of ideas. My work investigates the form or object that is propped up, the structure serving to support it and the relationships between the two.

My father worked with his hands, but not for a living. His job required a necktie. His time spent in the Army taught him a great deal about repairing things and problem solving. Our garage was full of tools and materials. Since Dad worked for a power tool company, there were always saws and drills of various sizes and ages lying about. He built the triple-decker bunk bed I shared with my two older brothers. It was a solid thing made of construction grade lumber and plywood, painted, screwed and bolted. It was well thought out with bins at the head of each bunk and a removable ladder. All the edges were rounded and surfaces smoothed to allow for plenty of handling and climbing. It was strictly utilitarian,

nothing fancy or graceful about it. He built the kitchen table and benches in similar fashion, functional and sturdy enough for a family of eight.

It was through this exposure to building that I first realized the potential of a piece of wood, two hands and a few tools. Dad also built and flew remote-controlled airplanes. Similar to fish, they are made to perform in a particular environment and are somewhat difficult to handle otherwise. He stored them, disassembled in a net-like construction made of wood and chicken wire that was suspended from the ceiling of the garage, like a harvest of fruit in a hammock or a fresh catch of the day. Though it was not until recently that I returned to these memories, I now realize that the bunk bed and airplane hammock served as support structures that inform the way I think about suspending objects.

Early in my art training I was more interested in graphic art than sculpture or furniture design. In high school, I took to drawing and painting because they were easily accessible media and I was halfway good at them. After learning screen-printing in high school, I decided to work at a screen-printing shop after graduation. That job gave me enough experience and confidence to apply to North Carolina State University's School of Design in Raleigh. There I studied Art & Design. I initially majored in graphic design, which after the first year was primarily performed on a computer, an approach that did not engage me. I quickly gravitated to a more hands-on approach to making work, especially image making. Simple printmaking techniques and general two dimensional art studies constituted the bulk of my art making there. Woodcuts became my primary tools for generating imagery.

After university, I shared space with eight other artists in an old washboard factory right next to the train tracks in town. Unaware of the 1960's San Francisco art group of the

same name, we called it Antfarm. The factory provided studio space for painters, blacksmiths, woodworkers, ceramists (including my future wife, Meredith) and many in between. My friend and I established Horse & Buggy Press there. We used old Vandercook proofing letterpresses and cases of metal and wood type to print show prints for bands, invitations, small books and of course, artists' prints. I've played drums in various bands since high school so this was a perfect fit for announcing gigs and designing/making record covers. I found a great respect for fine woodworking at Antfarm through sharing the space with a woodworker. He patiently and deliberately made very interesting work employing traditional joinery, using mostly hand tools. I might be chiseling away at a small cherry woodblock for printing, while across the shop, he would be chiseling away at a large mortise or tenon, cut from oak. I discovered a level of intimacy with the material that one gains only by working it with hand tools. I gradually made a transition from thinking about wood two dimensionally, to thinking about it in three. So, I started recovering wood from discarded pallets or other sources and I began educating myself about working wood to make furniture.

To broaden my skill-set, I began working in a wood shop that was established and practicing in the industry. I worked at two different custom furniture/cabinet shops from 2002-2008. I was a fabricator and was not very involved in the design phase of the work. I learned a great deal as a maker but wanted to branch out to explore my own designs and ideas. Though I was working with wood everyday, I was finding my creative outlet mostly through making prints and playing drums during nights and weekends. I returned to the lure theme and printed a series of bass lure woodcuts. At about this time (2008), my wife accepted a teaching position in Indiana. This transition allowed me to quit my day job and

pursue an artist residency in the furniture department at Maine College of Art (MECA) in Portland, Maine. Though Indiana and Maine are a thousand miles apart, Meredith and I decided to make a go of it for those nine months. We had endured distances before so the geographical separation was a familiar circumstance. I was able to carry the momentum of the lure prints north to Maine and I feel like it was there that I began in earnest to explore and find my voice as an artist in the language of furniture and its relationships to sculpture.

MECA is situated in downtown Portland, on the hill overlooking Casco Bay. All through town, the history of the place dating back to the late 1600's is still prominent. Largely brick structures abound including an old brick town square. Down by the water, boathouses and piers with lobster traps and buoys populate the shoreline. Surrounded by this maritime culture, I started absorbing it as an influence and allowed it to conjure up past influences of such waterfront environs.

Man adapts by making things, forming tools and conforming to nature's parameters. We build boats to float on water and docks to moor boats. To repair the bottoms of boats, a method of dry-docking is used where the boat is pulled out of water and suspended off the ground by screw jacks only a foot or two high. These vessels built for water with round bottom and straight protruding keel, are held up by many small tripod-based linear elements. The sight of these vessels suspended out of water made for topics in a conversation with myself that I would keep returning to as an artist in my studio. Having spent time working in the furniture/cabinet shops in North Carolina, I naturally tried to fit this conversation into the realm of functional furniture. Ever since my undergraduate studies, I had been coming to terms with the architect Louis Sullivan's idea that form ever follows function. My time

working in the wood shops reinforced that idea and tamed an impulse in me to explore the sculptural potential of the medium. So, at this point, it was important for me to revive that impulse to explore and avoid forcing functionality into my evolving ideas. At the same time, it was important for them to still have a relationship to hand-made furniture and woodworking. When I approached these ideas thinking they would form a cabinet with a door or some type of table with drawers, the designs felt stifled and not very exploratory. I believe there is a point at which the idea (or form) must take precedence. To force function onto it, in the name of furniture, would be bogus and no doubt, appear contrived. Once I dropped functionality from the equation, the form was freed up and started to take shape. It allowed for a sense of ambiguity and intrigue that negated the requirements of size and other requisite characteristics of functional objects. The result was *Sway*, 2008 (plate 1), made during my residency in Maine, hand-worked, tall, spindly and non-functional. Five individual forms about four feet in length, resembling fish, lures, airships or bullets (constructed from strips of wood) are held up nine feet off the ground. Each one is held up by two crutch-like stands that have tripod bases and long thin vertical posts reaching up to the underbelly of the object they are supporting. It is a precarious situation. They are grouped together like a school or flock. The stands are made of cherry wood and are assembled using joinery traditionally found in furniture making. The supports present themselves as more refined than the objects, which are built entirely from scrap wood of various species and nailed together. The stands serve to support the lure forms like jack stands supporting a dry docked boat, but because of their refined construction, length and material, they become something more than simply a means of support. They speak of hand- building with wood and even suggest a

preindustrial approach to working with materials. They also create a tension by testing the perceived limitations of wood. The sticks used to construct them are so thin, they seem likely to break at any minute. They are custom stands in essence. They function specifically for these objects and without them the stands would lose their identity and purpose. Without the stands, the objects would be flopping around on the ground, so to speak. In fact, *Sway* represents a number of ideas and physical characteristics that I am still exploring in my current work.

MY INFLUENCES

The linear characteristics of the stands stem, in part, from the work of artist Ben Shahn. Shahn was a strong influence on my work while at Antfarm and I continue to develop the ideas that impress me most about his images. Though Shahn worked mostly in tempera paint and photography and would be considered a social realist, I am interested in the way he used lines to formally create an environment or atmosphere. While his lines were graphic in nature (black, and drawn with a seemingly unsteady hand), when similar lines are represented three-dimensionally, they occupy space in a way that draws the viewer in and around, like a grove of trees.

I have also drawn influence from the work of the artist Martin Puryear. For me his sculptures successfully speak of hand-building techniques, craftsmanship and woodworking while allowing the form to take precedence. Puryear manipulates the cultural significance of forms, material and objects in a way that gives each sculpture an ambiguous meaning, as if it were a tool or functional object of sorts, taken out of context. While rooted in a minimalist aesthetic, he does not use materials in reference to industrial fabrication. Rather he applies

his carpentry skills to suggest a more hand-built and primitive, yet refined sensibility. His work requires a bit of work from the viewer. Like all successful art, in my view, it forces the audience to make their own associations and decisions in order to define what they are viewing. The most impactful of Puryear's sculptures are of a scale that forces the viewer to consider their own role in the immediate environment. When entering a room with these human size (or larger) pieces, the sculptures seem as if they belong there and we, the viewers are compelled to consider our relevance. The sculptures don't feel alien however, because they are constructed of wood and other familiar materials. These juxtapositions add to the intrigue, curiosity and appeal inherent in his work.

Another inspiration was Russian Constructivist sculptor Vladimir Tatlin's *Monument to the Third International* was of architectural scale also but never was built. I imagine the model for it being close to human scale and having a presence in a room similar to that of Puryear's work. The complex intertwining lines of *Monument* allow it to occupy space in an open and airy way, yet the lines all combine to create a defined shape or form.

Much of what is built for the water has historically been built of wood. Though wood is a very versatile material, its enemy is water and sun. Whereas water and sun are what a tree needs to grow, when exposed to such elements, lumber will rot and decay. This cycle has always struck me as a natural dichotomy bordering on contradiction. Understanding and respecting the cycle of growth and decay is an important aspect of working with wood. Though the vessels I make of wood are not seaworthy, the long history of wood joinery in boat building as well as furniture making and general woodworking allow me to make a connection with these traditions and present them in a modern context.

With industrialization and the advances in man-made materials and fabrication, the demand and need for fine craftsmanship is arguably obsolete. With Modernism, came the notion that furniture is simply a tool or equipment, strictly utilitarian. Such narrow views of furniture opened polemical dialogues and divisions that are still present in the worlds of art and crafts. I feel that by bringing the traditional elements of furniture making and woodworking techniques to the fore in my work, I can advance the discussion further in a positive way. When I cut a splayed, stopped and wedged scarf joint in order to join two short pieces of wood to make one long piece, I am not just being resourceful; I am referencing a joinery method that can be seen in a house in Japan or a hundred-year-old apple barn in Appalachia. Instead of simply finding a longer piece of wood, I want to integrate a history and a way of problem solving that brings to mind a thoughtful intention often lacking in today's world of shortcuts and temporary structures.

In my opinion, some of the great Danish artists of mid-century furniture design found a graceful marriage of form and function somewhere between Modernism and studio craft that displays thoughtful intention. Though mostly designed for production, the Danes were able to represent both a long history of working with wood (by exhibiting a mastery of and sensitivity to the material) and a modern approach to representing form. Using function as their dominant design element, Hans Wegner, Finn Juhl and Arne Jacobsen made chairs that were stripped of any superfluous design elements or overt references to the past. By paring down to a design's essential parts, they created an aesthetic that is as simple and graceful as a tool handle.

I was inspired by the clean refined Danish aesthetic when I began to further investigate the lure shape. I started doing more formal studies on the form. As I was nailing the strips of wood onto the carcass of the lure forms in *Sway* I realized that to get them to fit precisely, I would need to learn something about coopering and bent laminations. So, for the refined studies of the form, I began experimenting and teaching myself the many difficulties involved in these techniques. I refined the basic shape into a faceted pod form while moving away from the lure reference and returning to an exercise in functional furniture. I was researching works of other artists like Bryan Hunt (his airship forms specifically) and chairs designed by Charles and Ray Eames. Though I thought I had a great deal of experience in the field, my efforts to create *Shell Stool*, 2009 (plate 2) and *Coopered Cabinet*, 2010 (plate 3) both proved that there remains a lifetime of learning in woodworking. The bent laminations and coopering in these projects were an exciting and challenging exercise but I work in such a way that my meticulousness and fear of making mistakes began to get in the way of significant visible progress. I put a lot of thought and planning into the execution of these pieces.

I feel *Shell Stool* was a successful translation (of the rounded form/linear support structure composition) into the realm of refined functional objects. While serving a different conceptual motive, *Coopered Cabinet* was a useful exercise in technique and functionality. At this point, I was satisfied with my studies in coopering. I wanted to explore further the linear elements of stick-built construction. Whenever I passed by a construction site with scaffolding, a train trestle or bridge I thought about the accumulation of many small parts to form a structural support unit. My subsequent research yielded a wealth of examples of such

structures ranging from airship factories to Native American burial scaffolds and other artists employing such methods of building.

A recent inspiration has been the Starn brothers' *Big Bambu*, a large sculpture made of bamboo poles lashed together to create a mass of interlocked lines. In their temporary installation, poles were constantly being moved from one part of the form to another to suggest a living, morphing thing of architectural scale. They were certainly influenced by the common Chinese practice of scaffold construction using bamboo fixed with rope lashings.

MY MFA THESIS WORK

The more I contemplated my work after I entered graduate school at Herron School of Art and Design, the more interested I became in the idea of support structures as a concept. I started seeing the structural supports as not just stands, chair legs, scaffolding and bunk beds, but as metaphorically being representative of social and familial support structures. For me (and my work), support structures are those abstract networks that allow us to do what we do and make what we make. They represent acquired knowledge and personal experience linking together like sticks in a trestle to support our ideas and goals. One thought leads to another thought. Sometimes they link in a neat orderly way and other times they are random and cobbled together in an unpredictable jumble. These support structures hold up our ideas and beliefs and I think, ultimately they define who we are. My work for my MFA thesis exhibition takes shape in the form of linear scaffold-like structures made of wood, that support somewhat ambiguous forms that are in need of propping-up. *The Getting There*, 2011 (plates 4 and 5) is a sculpture that is ten feet tall, with a footprint of roughly seven feet in diameter. The vessel form it supports is similar in shape to the closed boat-like shape I've

been working with for several years. The vessel is six feet tall and resembles a patchwork of scraps with a few random doors and a drawer referencing functional furniture and the scrap bin at the same time. It is biographical in that it is representative of my time in the Herron Furniture Design program. The scraps are from my collection. Some came from the shop's scrap bin, which includes pieces of many different students' projects, including students whom I have taught. Some scraps are from my house, which my wife and I have been renovating. Some are pieces I've been carrying around for a while. They (and the vessel as a whole) represent in a way, ideas and projects I've worked on and applied my acquired knowledge to. The vessel is being held up, supported and simultaneously surrounded by scaffolding (the acquired knowledge and experience). Their relationship is a symbiotic one. The structure would be purposeless and make no sense without the vessel and the vessel would be flopping around on the ground without the support.

The scaffold is made of walnut. Each stick is milled to $\frac{3}{4}$ -inch or one inch in square. Overall, it resembles several makeshift ladders leaning in from different directions toward the center, where the vessel form is contained and supported. At closer look, the ladders are made using a variety of joinery techniques specific to furniture making and house framing, including scarf, lap, and mortise and tenon joints. They create a network of crisscrossing diagonals, horizontals and verticals that spread and reach to encompass and define an area through which the viewer can see but not enter. Both the scaffold and the vessel command a certain amount of attention. They are visually distinct from one another but at the same time, they are both comprised of many small parts, like the thoughts and experiences that make up our personal support structures. I see our ideas and goals as destinations and I see all the little

parts of knowledge and memories we acquire and carry with us, as the traveling en route or “the getting there”.

As I was creating *The Getting There*, I became aware of another artist using a similar linking theme in his work. The sculptor Tadashi Kawamata creates wild scaffold-like structures that seem to grow in a similar way from an existing building or space, like a cancer growing upon itself and possibly eventually consuming its host. “The organic metaphor of the virus, which Kawamata uses quite deliberately, suggests a vision of urban growth that is mindless, unstoppable, and quite possibly pernicious to human life.” (Heartney, p. 332). Similar to Kawamata, I am interested in growing, interconnected systems of thought but in contrast, I see my structures as a growing personal knowledge with intentional direction, rather than a malignant type of scourge.

The second large-scale support structure created for my thesis exhibition is entirely stick built. *Definition*, 2011 (plates 6 and 7) is made up of a scaffold built of planed and oil-rubbed cherry wood. It supports a form made up of many scrap sticks joined together (in a tighter scaffold-like arrangement) to suggest a shape. Some of the sticks have paint on them and some have been cut through to expose bare wood and nail holes suggesting they have a history to them. The scaffold works its way up a wall to about fourteen feet in height. As the structure climbs, it spreads out in all directions so its footprint is smaller than its top. At the top sits the form, overhanging and projecting straight out from the wall. While the scrap-sticks comprising the vessel form are different in color and size, the form and the structure appear as though they are becoming one. The form seems to be growing from the scaffold just as our identities as individuals seem to grow from our experiences and personal histories.

As an evolving idea and a direction for my work after graduation, I am excited about the possibilities of such structures.

When we define our goals and aspirations, we expect to be able to clearly mark the point where or when they are reached. Where or when is that point? We head off in a general direction and begin acquiring and collecting information, knowledge, friends and experiences. The support structure grows, stick by stick. Through accomplishing small goals we are able to refine our expectations to an extent, but a clear finish line to cross suggesting we have arrived remains elusive. After a while, we are able to step back and look around and begin to realize we are often defined by our travels rather than our destinations. The support structure becomes the form itself. My time at Herron School of Art and Design is not defined by the degree I have earned but by the friendships, skills and knowledge I have acquired. To quote the late great songwriter Townes Van Zandt, “Where you been is good and gone. All you take’s the gettin’ there.”



1. Ray Duffey · *Sway*, 2008, wood, 5'x 15'x 9'



2. Ray Duffey · *Shell Stool*, 2009, wood, steel



3. Ray Duffey · *Coopered Cabinet*, 2010, wood, 18" x 9" x 35"



4. Ray Duffey · *The Getting There*, 2011, wood, 7'x7'x10'



5. Ray Duffey · *The Getting There* (detail), 2011, wood



6. Ray Duffey · *Definition* (detail), 2011, wood



7. Ray Duffey · *Definition*, 2011, wood, 2'x 4'x 14'

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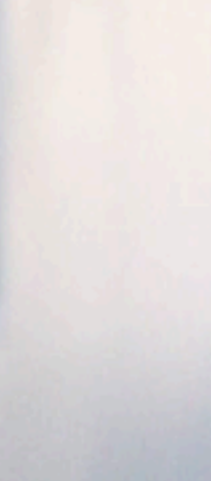
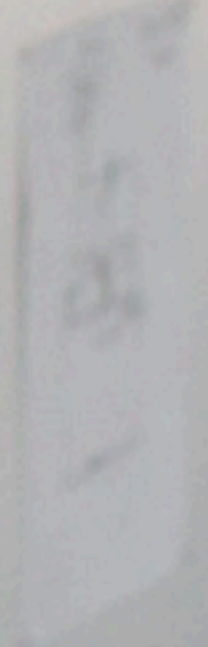
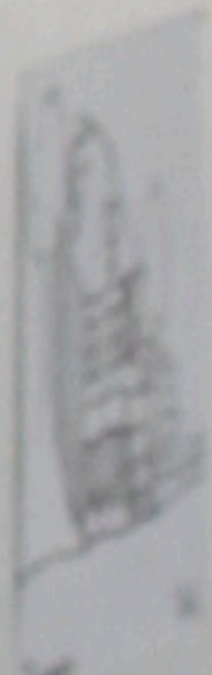
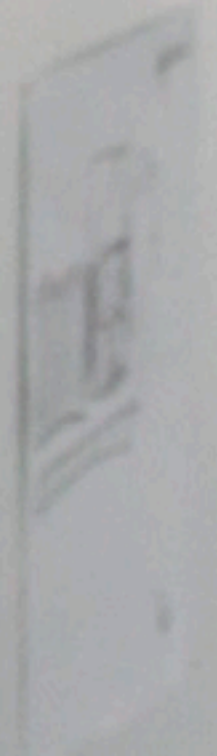
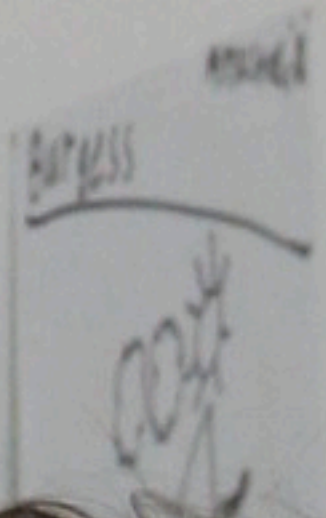
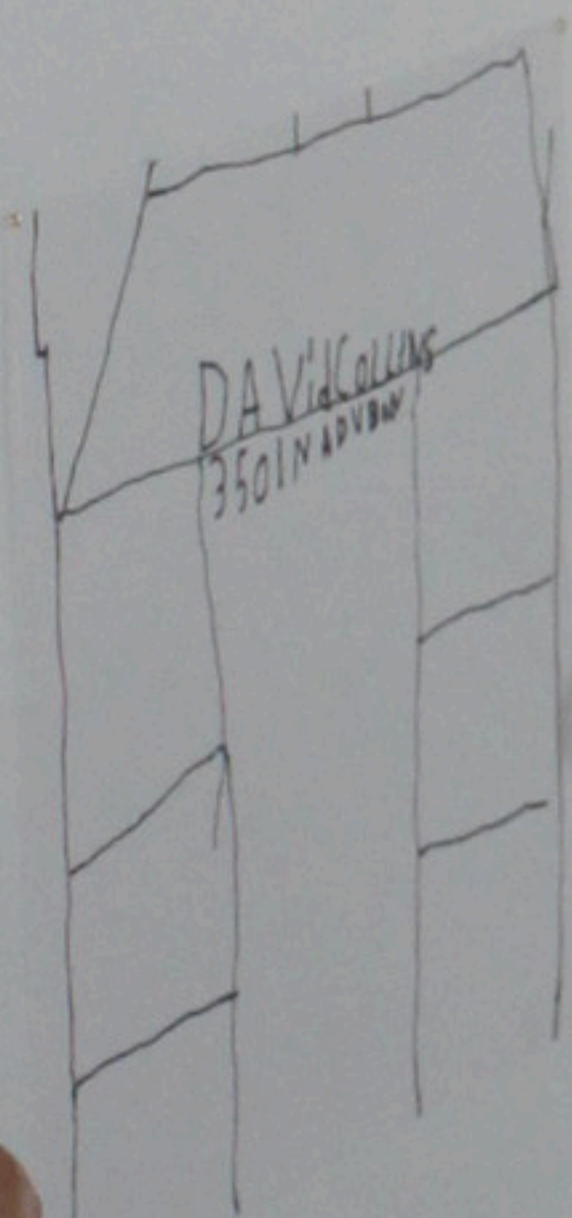
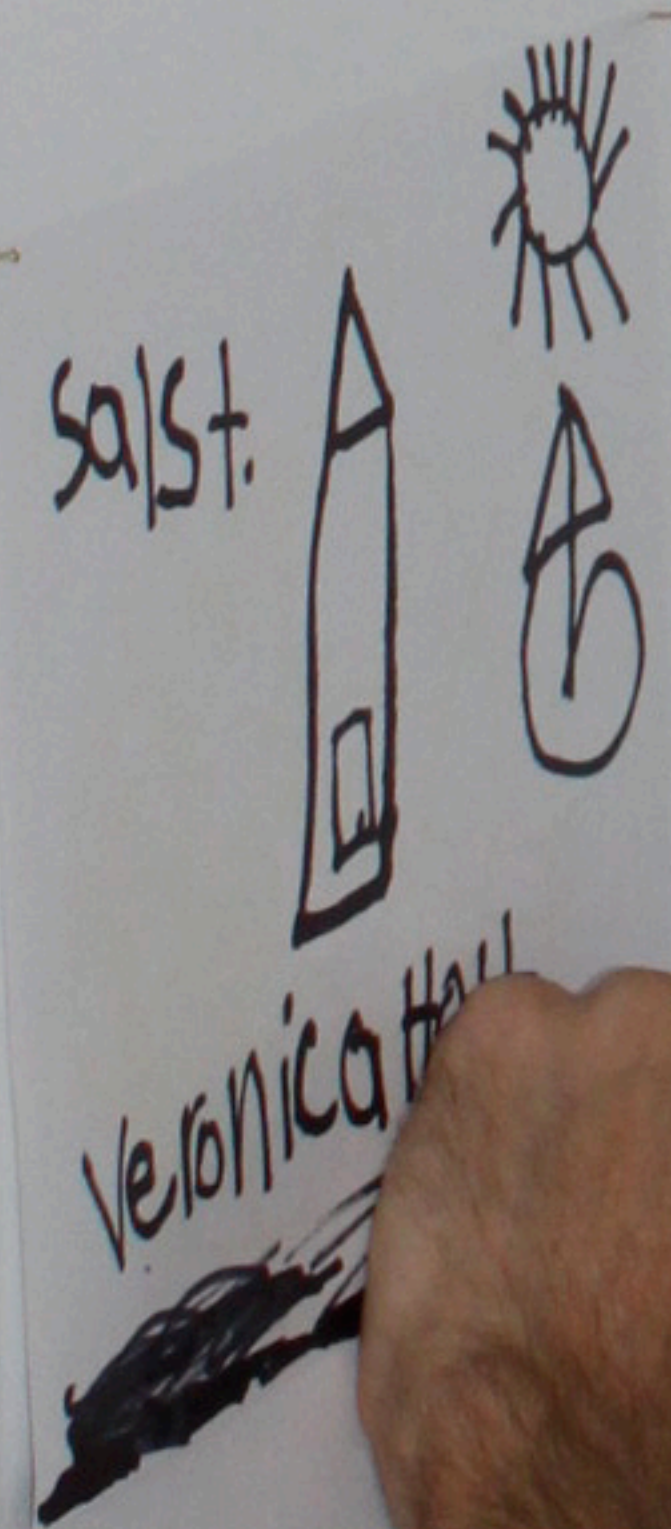
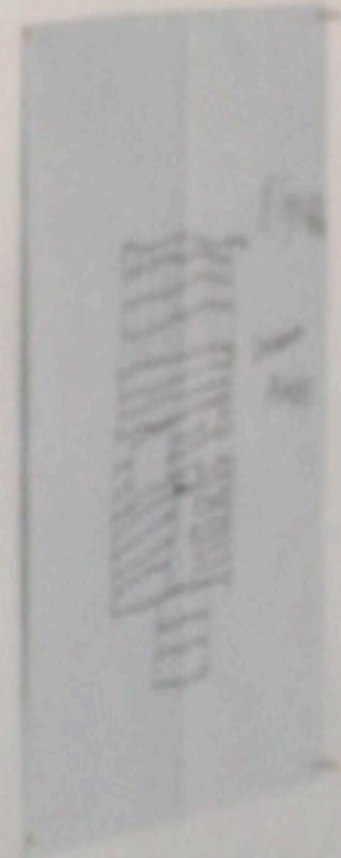
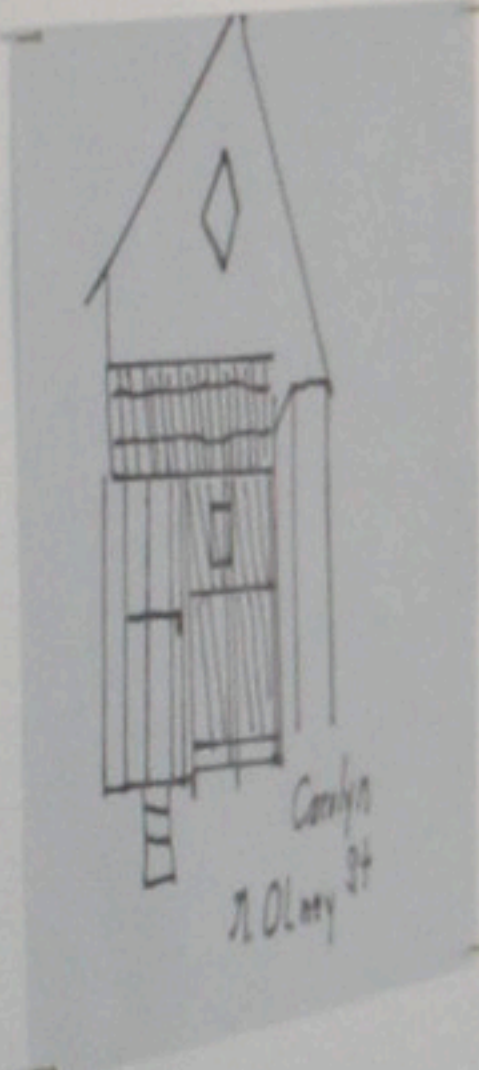
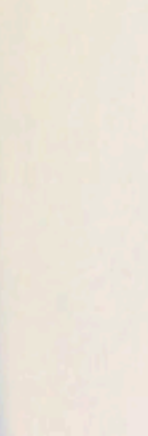
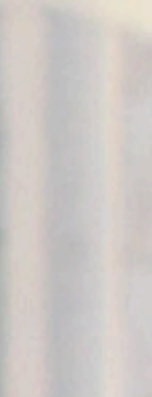
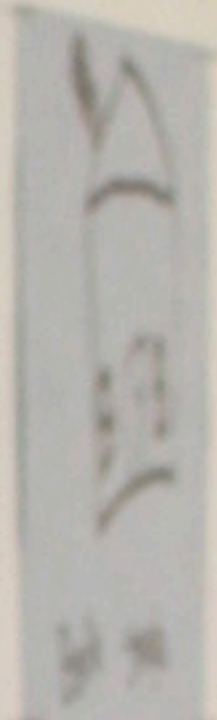
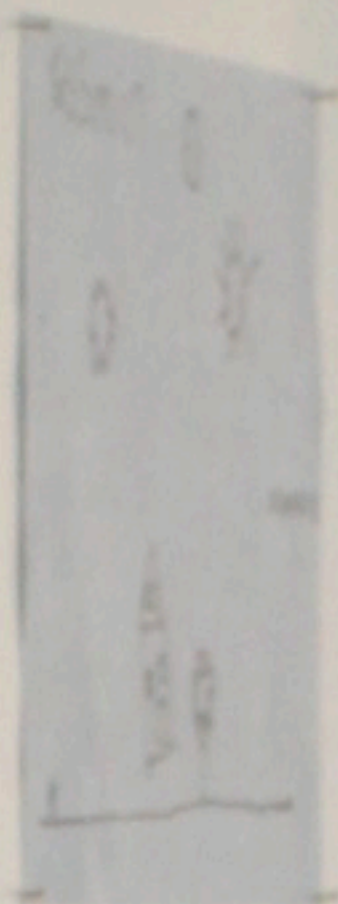
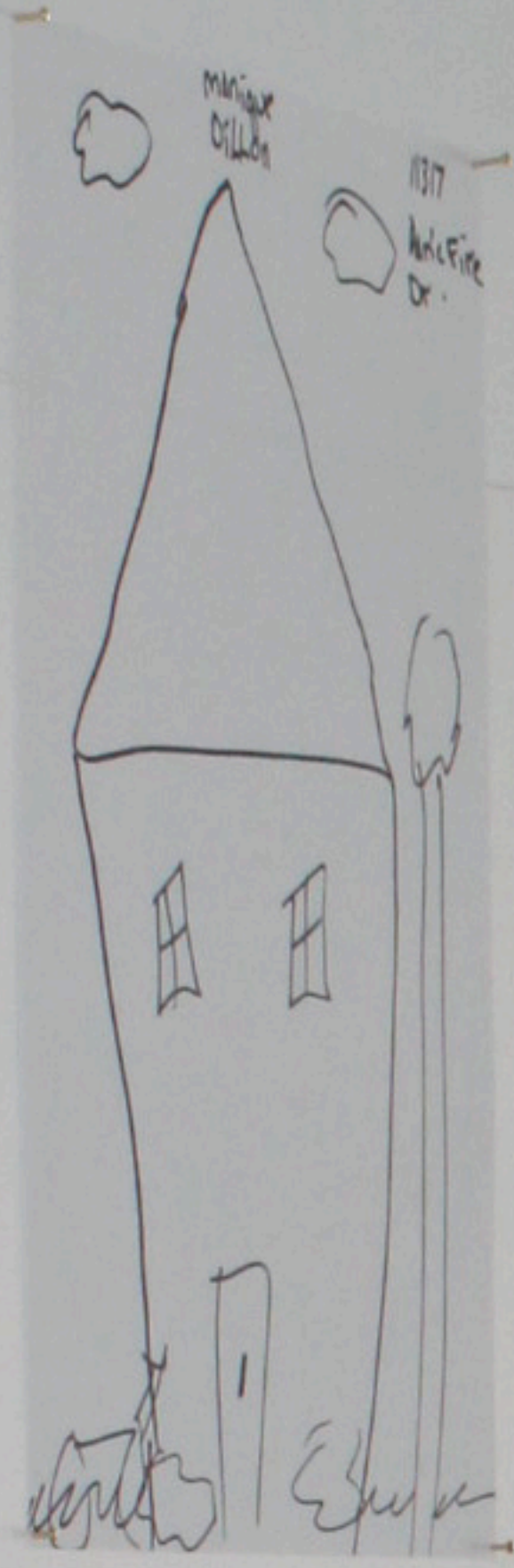
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we

FINISHED drawings

DOUG A. Iannelli

Savannah

My house is the best house in the world.

POUNDAGE DON-200

MIRIAM NEW YORK

EMILY

Emily's house











